

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks Following a Meeting With Members of Congress

June 25, 2009

Hello, everybody. We have just finished what I consider to be a very productive meeting on one of the most critical issues that I think this Nation faces, and that is an immigration system that is broken and needs fixing.

We have Members of Congress from both Chambers and from both parties, who have participated in the meeting and shared a range of ideas. I think the consensus is that despite the—our inability to get this passed over the last several years, the American people still want to see a solution in which we are tightening up our borders or cracking down on employers who are using illegal workers in order to drive down wages and oftentimes mistreat those workers. And we need a effective way to recognize and legalize the status of undocumented workers who are here.

Now, this is—there is not by any means consensus across the table. As you can see, we've got a pretty diverse spectrum of folks here. But what I'm encouraged by is that after all the overheated rhetoric and the occasional demagoguery on all sides around this issue, we've got a responsible set of leaders sitting around the table who want to actively get something done and not put it off until a year, 2 years, 3 years, 5 years from now, but to start working on this thing right now.

My administration is fully behind an effort to achieve comprehensive immigration reform. I have asked my Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, Secretary Janet Napolitano, to lead up a group that is going to be working with a leadership group from both the House and the Senate to start systematically working through these issues from the congressional leaders and those with the relevant jurisdiction. What we've heard is through a process of regular order, they would like to work through these issues both in the House and in the Senate.

In the meantime, administratively, there are a couple of things that our administration has already begun to do. The FBI has cleared much of the backlog of immigration background checks that was really holding up the legal immigration process. DHS is already in the process of cracking down on unscrupulous employers and, in collaboration with the Department of Labor, working to protect those workers from exploitation.

The Department of Homeland Security has also been making good progress in speeding up the processing of citizenship petitions, which has been far too slow for far too long. And that, by the way, is an area of great consensus, cuts across Democratic and Republican parties, the notion that we've got to make our legal system of immigration much more efficient and effective and customer-friendly than it currently is.

Today I'm pleased to announce a new collaboration between my Chief Information Officer, my Chief Performance Officer, my Chief Technologies Officer, and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Office to make the agency much more efficient, much more transparent, much more user-friendly than it has been in the past.

In the next 90 days, USCIS will launch a vastly improved web site that will, for the first time ever, allow applicants to get updates on their status of their applications via e-mail and text message and online. And anybody who's dealt with families who are trying to deal with,

navigate the immigration system, this is going to save them huge amounts of time standing in line, waiting around, making phone calls, being put on hold. It's an example of some things that we can do administratively, even as we're working through difficult issues surrounding comprehensive immigration. And the idea is very simple here. We're going to leverage cutting-edge technology to reduce the unnecessary paperwork, backlogs, and the lack of transparency that's caused so many people so much heartache.

Now, we all know that comprehensive immigration reform is difficult. We know it's a sensitive and politically volatile issue. One of the things that was said around the table is the American people still don't have enough confidence that Congress and any administration is going to get serious about border security. And so they're concerned that any immigration reform simply will be a short-term legalization of undocumented workers with no long-term solution with respect to future flows of illegal immigration.

What's also been acknowledged is that the 12 million or so undocumented workers are here, who are not paying taxes in the ways that we'd like them to be paying taxes, who are living in the shadows, that that is a group that we have to deal with in a practical, common-sense way. Now, I think the American people are ready for us to do so. But it's going to require some heavy lifting. It's going to require a victory of practicality and common sense and good policymaking over short-term politics. That's what I'm committed to doing as President.

I want to especially commend John McCain, who's with me here today, because along with folks like Lindsey Graham, he has already paid a significant political cost for doing the right thing. I stand with him; I stand with Nydia Velazquez and others who have taken leadership on this issue. I am confident that if we enter into this with the notion that this is a nation of laws that have to be observed and this is a nation of immigrants, then we're going to create a stronger nation for our children and our grandchildren.

So thank you all for participating. I'm looking forward to us getting busy and getting to work. All right? Thank you. Oh, and by the way, I hope everybody has got their Hawaiian shirts and their muumuus for our luau tonight.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:17 p.m. in the State Dining Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to White House Chief Information Officer Vivek Kundra; White House Chief Performance Officer Jeffrey D. Zients; and White House Chief Technology Officer Aneesh Chopra.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Congress :: Congressional leaders, meeting.

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Names: Chopra, Aneesh; Graham, Lindsey O.; Kundra, Vivek; McCain, John; Napolitano, Janet A.; Velazquez, Nydia M.; Zients, Jeffrey D.

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